

WASHINGTON, DC—The Oregon Congressional delegation announced today that Acting Director David Stockwell of the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center (PVAMC) has agreed to delay implementation of a new reimbursement policy for veterans. The Oregon delegation wrote Stockwell on June 21st, urging the VA to reconsider the reimbursement change citing the proposal as a financial hardship for many veterans around the state who must travel to Portland for medical services. Currently, veterans who must travel to a VA facility to receive health care services are eligible for travel reimbursement at 41.5 cents a mile and, in some cases, the cost of a hotel room. Veterans are able to receive reimbursements directly from the VA at the time they receive services. The reimbursement change was scheduled to take effect on July 1, 2010.

Under the proposed reimbursement policy, veterans would have to submit vouchers and wait weeks for travel reimbursements. Many veterans simply cannot afford to make lengthy trips without the option of continuing to receive travel reimbursements while at the VA facility. The policy could have compromised the health care of veterans who cannot afford to wait for reimbursement.

“I am pleased the VA has delayed this unfair proposal. The VA sometimes loses sight of its mission and creates additional barriers for veterans, rather than making it as easy as possible for vets to get the services they need,” DeFazio said. “Some veterans in the southern part of the state must travel to the Portland VA weekly for cancer treatments and other medical services. Under the proposed policy, the VA could owe these vets hundreds of dollars a month for travel expenses. This is an unreasonable burden on these families and it defies common sense. ”

“Delaying the new policy in how vets would get reimbursed for travel to the hospital is a good first step for the VA to take. Now, they need to listen to the vets who want the option of getting reimbursed on site where they get their treatment,” said Wyden. “Vets need to know that they won’t have to suffer from a financial hole in their pocket on top of any medical problems they face.”

“I appreciate that the VA has listened to the concerns brought forth by Oregon’s congressional delegation and that veterans will not have to delay or forfeit medical care because they could not afford the travel costs,” Merkley said. “Our veterans have already sacrificed for our country and we should make every effort to make accessing services easier for them -- not harder. Traveling long distances for necessary health care is a burden in itself and I’m glad that our veterans won’t have the extra burden this policy change would have imposed.”

“Our men and women in uniform deserve the best care possible,” said Schrader. “Many of our rural Veterans have to travel significant distances to receive medical treatment at their nearest VA clinic. We need to ensure that our Veterans receive timely reimbursements so they don’t have to choose between receiving medical treatment and placing food on their tables.”

The full text of the delegation letter is below:

June 21, 2010 David Stockwell, Acting Director Department of Veterans Affairs Medical  
Center 3710 SW US Veterans Hospital  
Road Portland OR 97239-2964

Dear Mr. Stockwell:

We are hearing from veterans and their family members about the new travel reimbursements process being implemented in Oregon on July 1, 2010. We share their concerns about delayed reimbursements and the potential for payment backlogs.

Many veterans live hundreds of miles from the VA facilities in Portland and Vancouver. For example, a veteran in Bandon traveling to Portland for care drives nearly 500 miles round-trip and receives a round-trip reimbursement rate of 41.5 cents a mile. Under the new policy, the veteran will have to wait for a reimbursement that may have previously provided the cash needed to fill the tank for the trip home.

As you well know, Oregon veterans are suffering chronic high unemployment rates. The Bureau of Labor Statistics notes the unemployment rate for young veterans under 25 years of age is over 20 percent. In this economic climate, the new procedure is going to be a financial

hardship for many Oregon veterans and may prevent them from receiving health care.

The beneficiary travel payment announcements being sent to veterans by the Medical Center state the new procedure “will improve efficiency” and “provide better customer service.” According to your customers, the new process will empty the pockets of veterans already struggling to make ends meet. Our constituents are telling us they want to have the option of waiting in line for their travel reimbursements because they simply cannot afford to loan the VA money for several weeks.

Please let us know before this policy is implemented if the VA Medical Center campuses in Portland and Vancouver will accommodate the needs of low income veterans for immediate reimbursements.

Sincerely,

Peter DeFazio

Earl Blumenauer

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Greg Walden

Kurt Schrader

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

Jeff Merkley

Ron Wyden

Senator

Senator

David Wu

Member of Congress